



Dispatch No. 832 | 8 August 2024

# Citizens in Congo-Brazzaville disapprove of government's COVID-19 response

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 832 | Walleign S. Hassen**

## Summary

Congo-Brazzaville confirmed its first COVID-19 case on 14 March 2020, a 50-year-old man who had travelled from Paris (Ross, 2020). Over time, the pandemic would result in 25,227 infections and claim 389 lives in the country, including that of presidential candidate Guy Brice Parfait Kolélas in March 2021 (World Health Organization, 2024; Okamba, 2021).

The pandemic also had widespread social and economic impacts. The World Bank (2021) estimated that the poverty rate rose by 4 percentage points in 2020, placing 290,000 more people in extreme poverty. Border closures, travel restrictions, and curfews limited public movement in 2020-2021, and critics say the government used COVID-19 as a justification for limiting campaign events ahead of the 2021 election (Freedom House, 2022; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

Health officials delivered more than 800,000 vaccine doses, with 12.1% of the population receiving at least one dose (Johns Hopkins University, 2023).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore the pandemic-related experiences and perceptions of citizens in Congo-Brazzaville.

Survey findings show that one in four Congolese households lost a primary source of income due to the pandemic. While a similar proportion received pandemic-related aid from the government, most citizens are dissatisfied with government efforts to provide assistance, say that assistance was distributed unfairly, and think that resources intended to address the impact of the pandemic were lost to corruption.

Overall, majorities are critical of the government's management of the COVID-19 response and think it is unprepared to deal with future public health emergencies. Only a minority of citizens trust their government to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

Although Congolese express a willingness to let the police or military enforce public health mandates during a pandemic, most are opposed to censoring media reporting during a public health emergency.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Congo-Brazzaville, led by national partner Association Avenir NEPAD Congo, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Congolese citizens in June and July 2023. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

## Key findings

### ■ Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- About one in 20 Congolese (6%) say a member of their household became ill with COVID-19 or tested positive for the virus, while one in four (25%) say someone in their household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic.

### ■ Attitudes toward vaccines:

- More than four in 10 adults (43%) say they have been vaccinated against COVID-19.
- Most others (44%) say they are “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” to try to get vaccinated.
- A majority of vaccine-hesitant citizens cite concerns about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines as their main reason for not receiving a dose.
- Only three in 10 respondents (30%) say they trust the government to ensure the safety of vaccines, while 38% don’t trust it at all.

### ■ Government response to COVID-19:

- About two-thirds (65%) of Congolese say the government did a poor job of managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Strong majorities are dissatisfied with the government’s efforts to provide assistance for vulnerable households (74%), ensure that health facilities are adequately resourced (65%), and minimise disruptions to children’s education (60%).
- Most citizens say that pandemic-related assistance was distributed unfairly (79%) and that “some” or “a lot” of the resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to corruption (84%).
- In response to a public health emergency like a pandemic, more than half of Congolese see it as justified to postpone elections (55%) and to use the police or military to enforce public health mandates (55%). But 70% oppose censorship of the media during such a crisis.

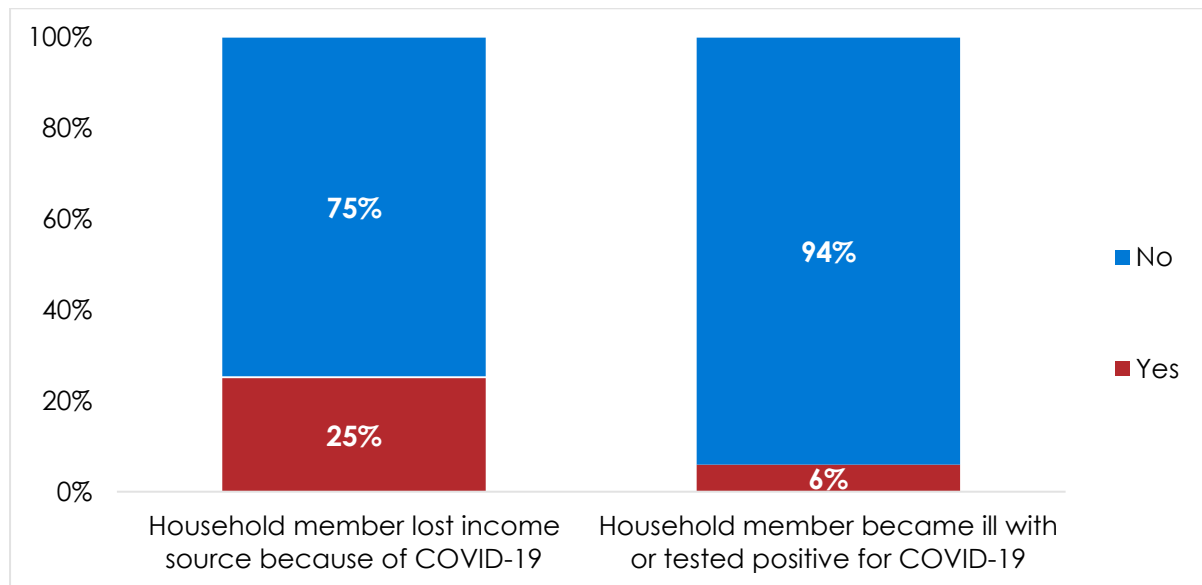
### ■ Looking ahead:

- More than two-thirds (68%) of Congolese think the government is not prepared to deal with future public health emergencies.
- But only 45% say the government needs to invest more in preparations for such a crisis if that would mean fewer resources are available for other health services.

## Effects of COVID-19

About one in 20 Congolese citizens (6%) say a member of their household became ill with COVID-19 or tested positive for the virus, while a quarter (25%) say someone in their household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Effects of COVID-19 | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with, or tested positive for, COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

No significant differences exist across different demographic groups reporting illness or positive COVID-19 tests.

However, there are significant variations in reports of economic losses. Urbanites are more than twice as likely as rural residents to report losing a primary source of income (31% vs. 13%) (Figure 2). Nearly a third (32%) of individuals aged 26-35 say they suffered a major financial loss, the highest rate of all demographic groups.

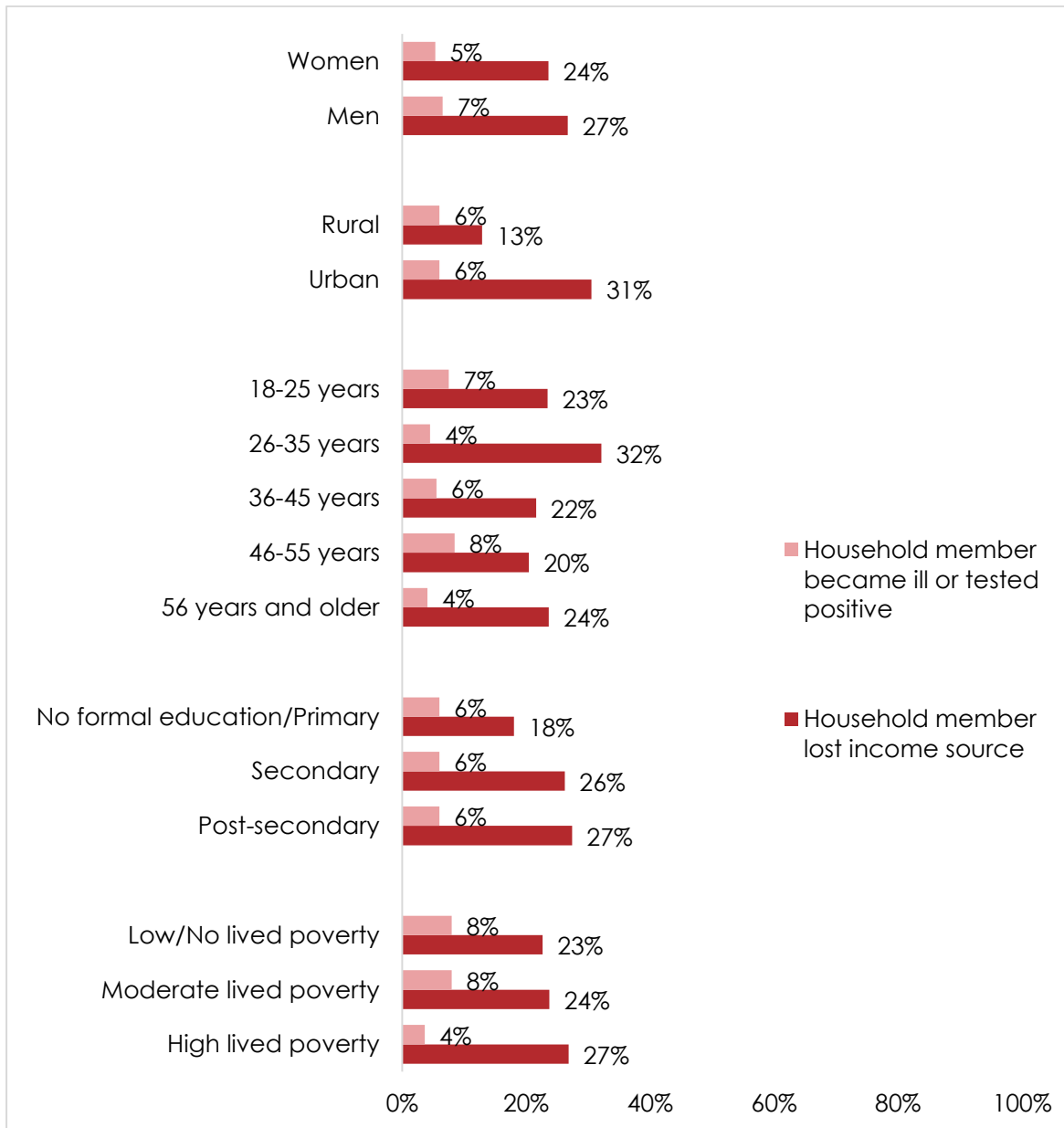
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Loss of an income source was less common among those with primary schooling or less (18%) than among more educated respondents (26%-27%). Citizens experiencing high lived poverty<sup>1</sup> (27%) are slightly more likely to report losing a main

income source than their better-off counterparts (23%-24%).

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

**Figure 2: Effects of COVID-19** | by demographic group | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023



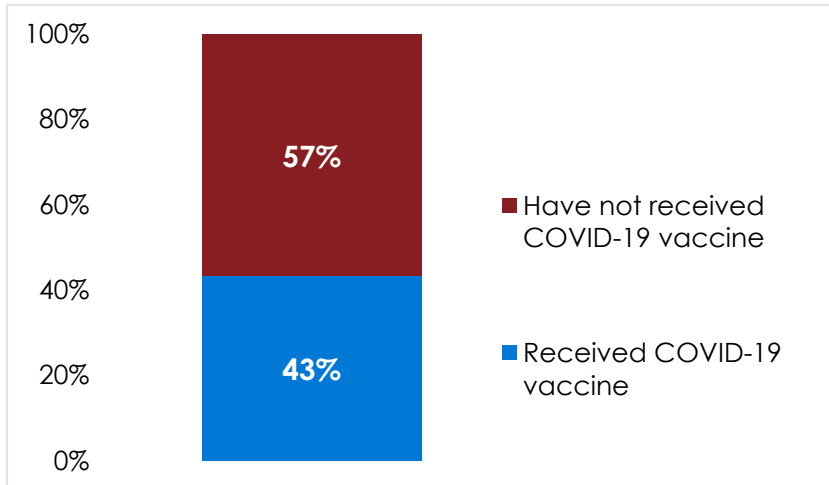
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business or primary source of income? (% who say "yes")

### Attitudes toward vaccination

More than four in 10 Congolese adults (43%) say they have been vaccinated against COVID-19 (Figure 3). Other sources estimate the vaccination rate for the whole population (not just adults, as in the Afrobarometer survey) at 12%-13% (Johns Hopkins University, 2023; World Health Organization, 2024).

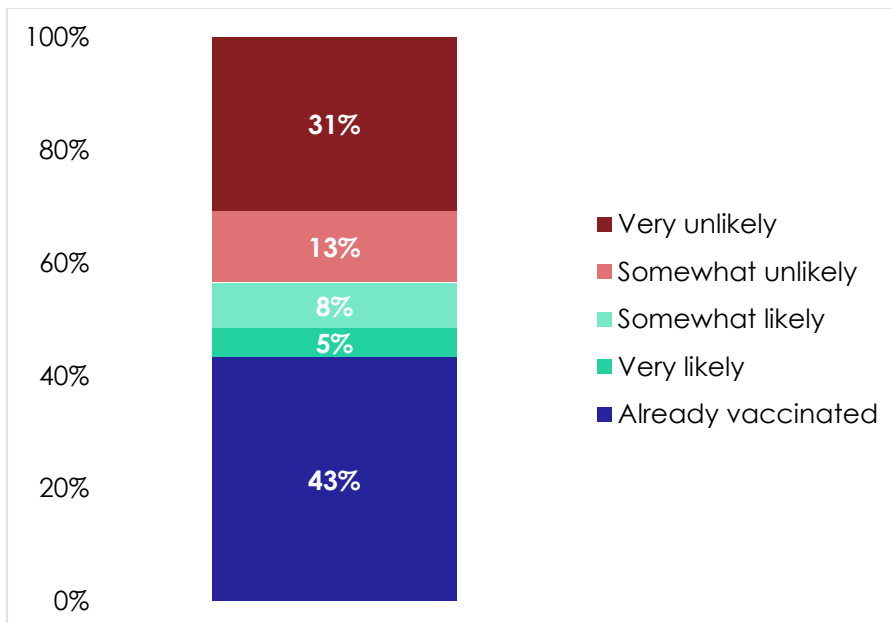
A similar proportion (44%) say they are unlikely to get vaccinated, including 31% who are "very unlikely" to do so (Figure 4). About one in eight respondents describe themselves as "somewhat likely" (8%) or "very likely" (5%) to get doses once they become available.

**Figure 3: Received COVID-19 vaccine | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you received a vaccination against COVID-19, either one or two doses?

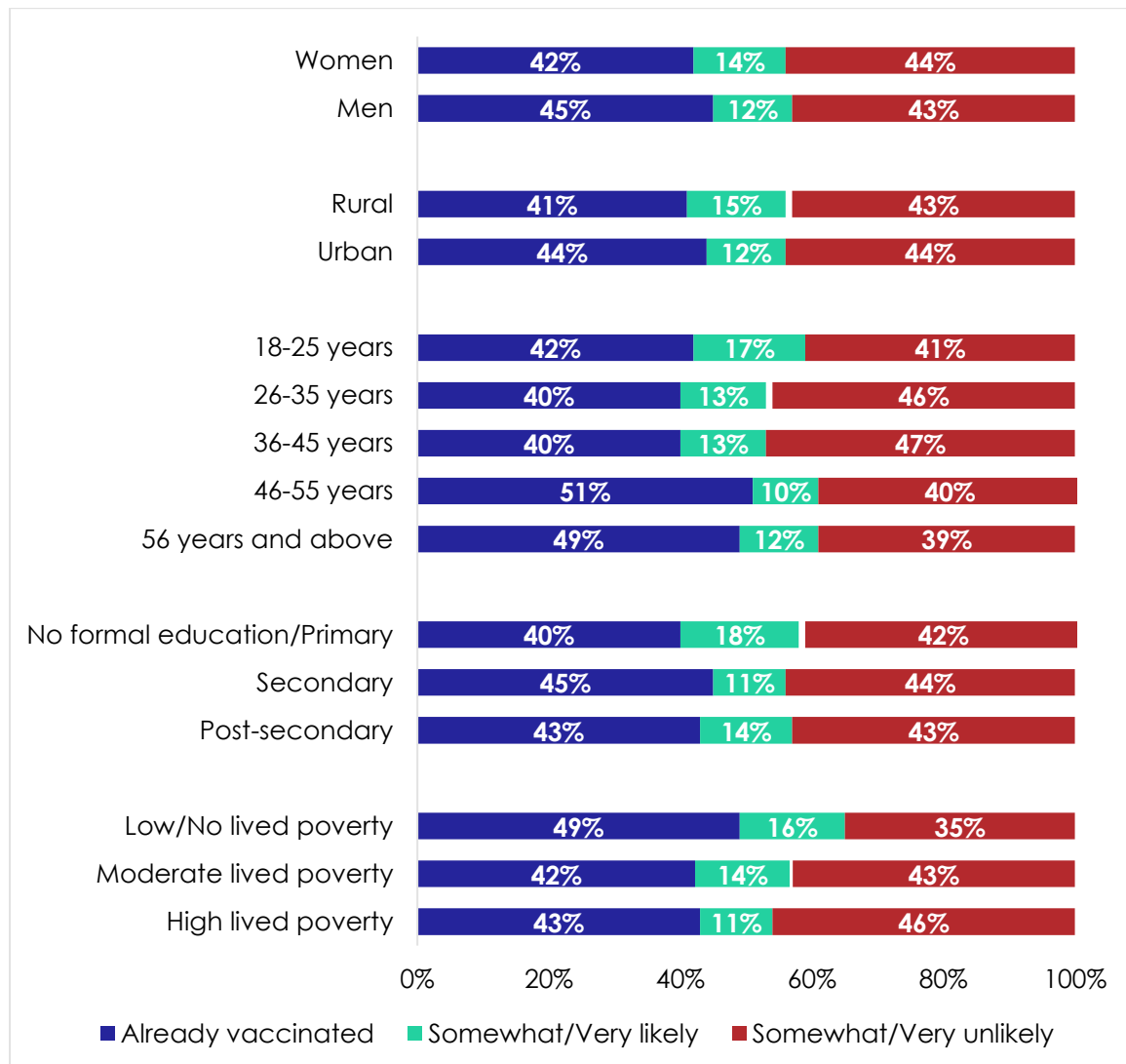
**Figure 4: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**



**Respondents who have not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19 were asked:** If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

Among citizens over the age of 45, about half (49%-51%) say they have received a COVID-19 vaccination, compared to 40%-42% among younger cohorts (Figure 5). Economically better-off respondents (49% of those experiencing no or low lived poverty) are more likely to be vaccinated than those experiencing higher levels of lived poverty (42%-43%). The lowest reported rates of vaccination are observed among the least educated (40% of those with no formal education or primary schooling only) and 26- to 45-year-olds (40%).

**Figure 5: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated** | by demographic group  
 | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023

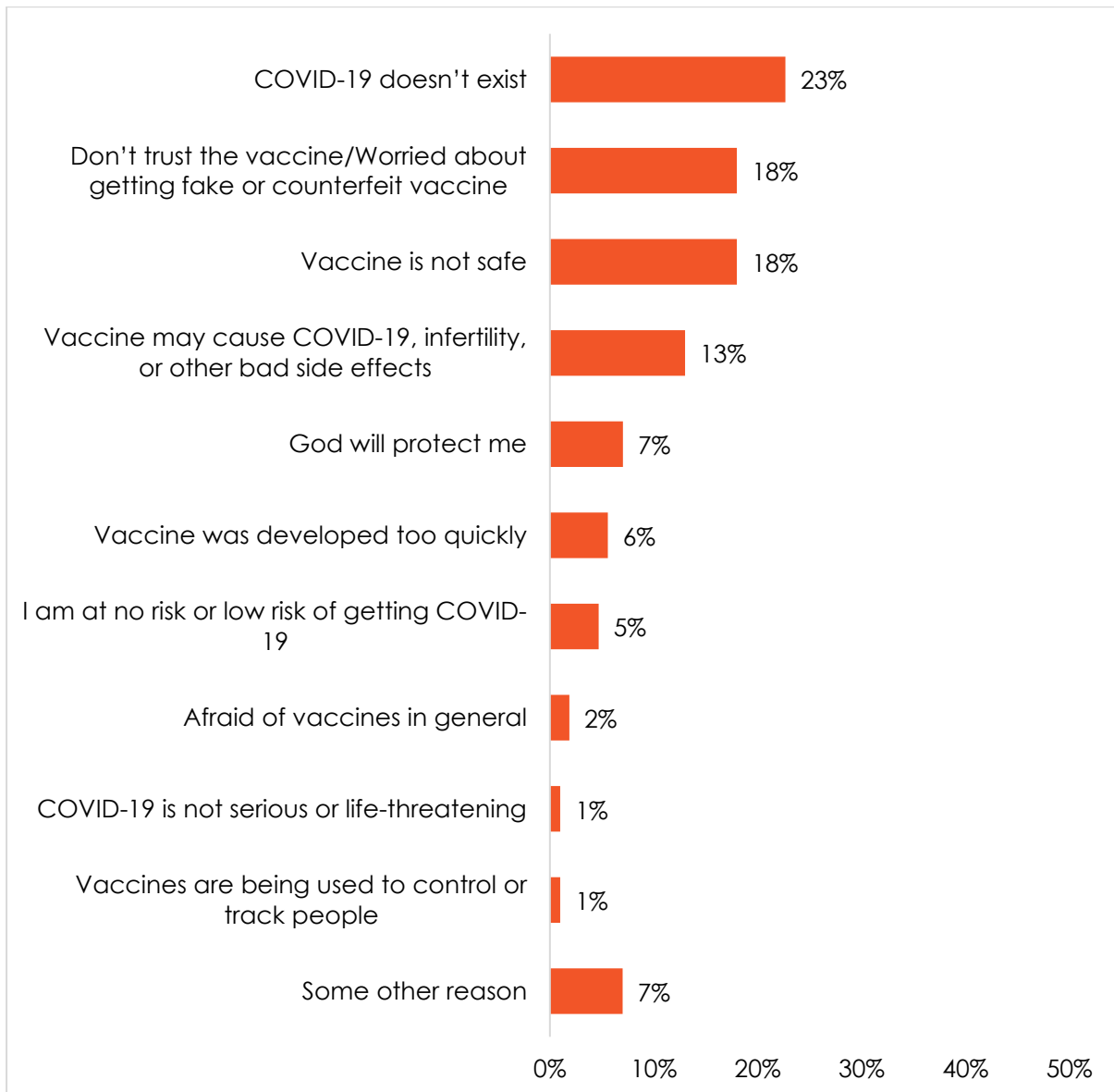


**Respondents who had not received the vaccine were asked:** *If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (Respondents who had received the vaccine are excluded.)*

Among citizens who say they are unlikely to get vaccinated, a majority cite concerns related to vaccine safety as the main reason for their stance: 18% think the vaccine is not safe; 18% do not trust the vaccine or are worried about getting a fake or counterfeit vaccine; 13% fear that the vaccine may cause COVID-19, infertility, or other bad side effects; and 6% think the vaccine was developed too quickly (Figure 6).

Others believe that COVID-19 doesn't exist (23%), that God will protect them against COVID-19 (7%), or that they are at no risk or low risk of getting COVID-19 (5%).

**Figure 6: Main reason for vaccine hesitancy | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**

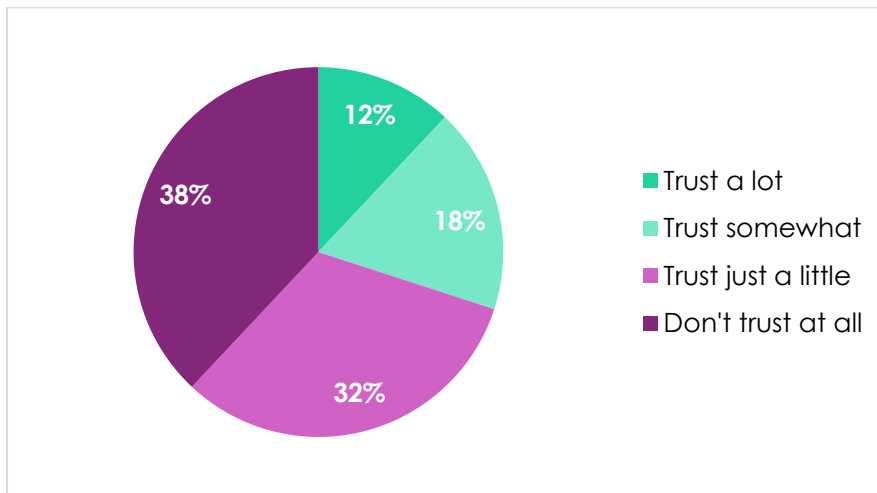


**Respondents who say they are not likely to get vaccinated were asked:** What is the main reason that you would be unlikely to get a COVID-19 vaccine?

Concerns about vaccine safety present a major obstacle to government efforts to vaccinate the population. Only three in 10 Congolese say they trust the government “somewhat” (18%) or “a lot” (12%) to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, while most express “just a little” (32%) or “no trust at all” (38%) in the government’s capacity to ensure vaccine safety (Figure 7).

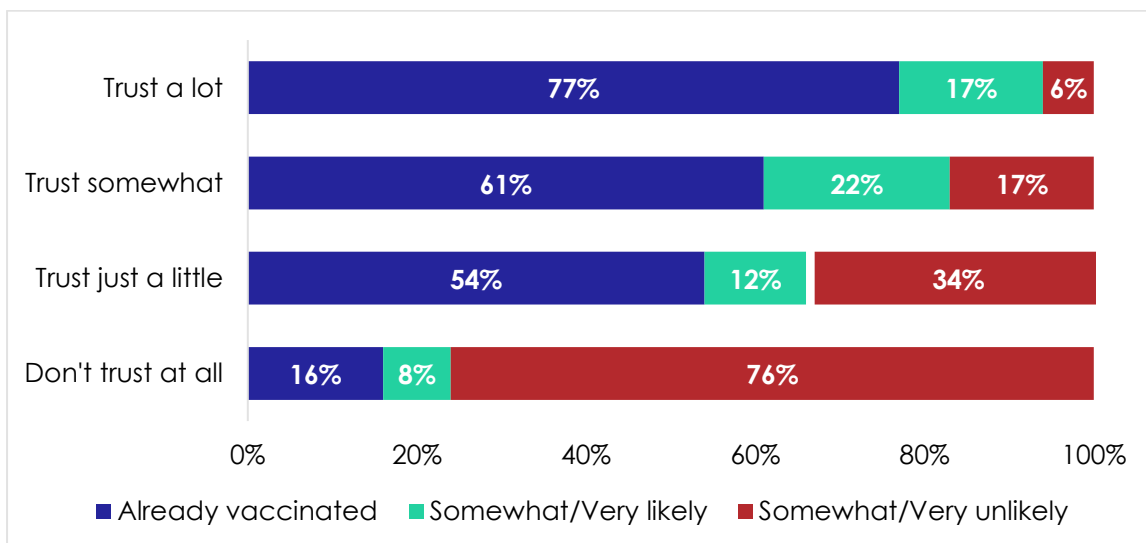
Citizens’ willingness to get vaccinated against COVID-19 is strongly correlated with their trust in the government’s ability to ensure vaccine safety. Citizens who trust the government “a lot” to ensure vaccine safety are about five times as likely to be vaccinated as those who express no trust at all (77% vs. 16%) (Figure 8). Vaccine hesitancy is 13 times more common among the untrusting (76%) than among the trusting (6%).

**Figure 7: Trust government to ensure vaccine safety | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Congo-Brazzaville citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

**Figure 8: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | by trust in government to ensure vaccine safety | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**



**Respondents were asked:** If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Congo-Brazzaville citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

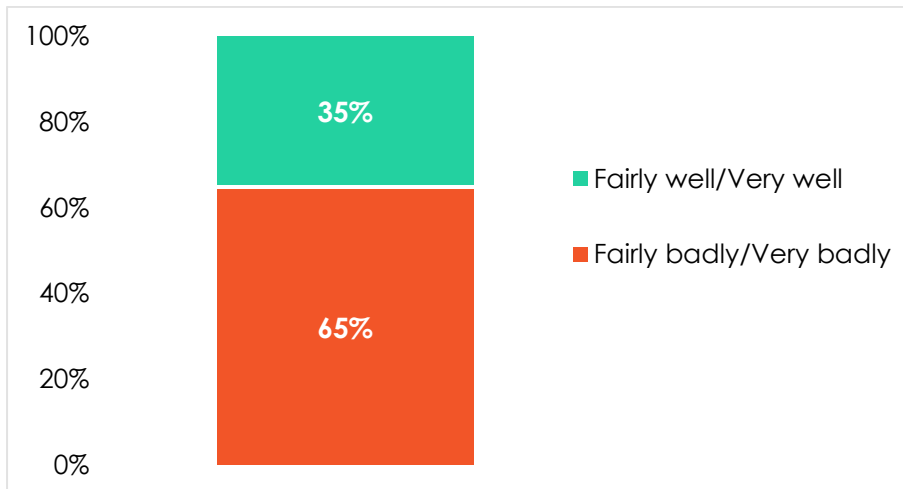
### Government response to COVID-19

Along with expressing little trust in the government's ability to ensure vaccine safety, about two-thirds (65%) of Congolese describe the government's overall performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as "fairly" or "very" poor (Figure 9).

Citizens are also not satisfied with particular aspects of the government's response to COVID-19. Strong majorities are unhappy with its performance in providing relief assistance to the vulnerable (74%), equipping health-care facilities with adequate resources to deal with the pandemic (65%), and ensuring that disruptions to children's education are minimised (60%) (Figure 10).

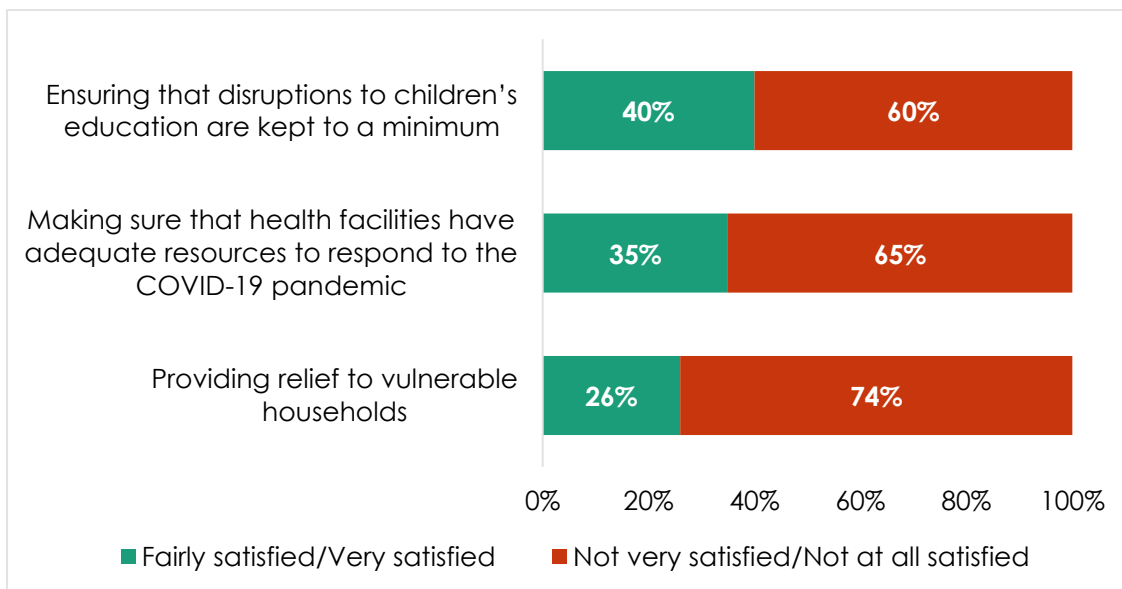


**Figure 9: Government response to COVID-19 | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government has managed the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Figure 10: Satisfaction with government's efforts in response to COVID-19 | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**



**Respondents were asked:** How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the government's response to COVID-19 in the following areas?

### COVID-19 relief assistance

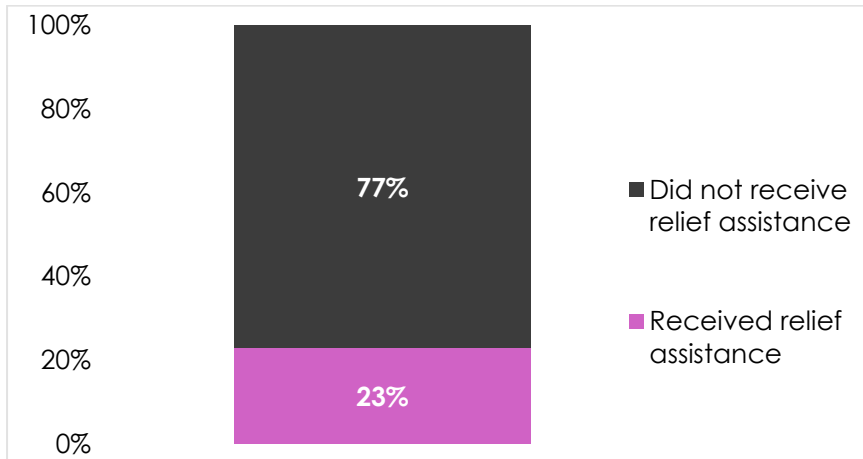
Not quite one-fourth (23%) of Congolese report that their household received pandemic-related assistance from the government, while 77% say they did not (Figure 11).

Rural households are less likely to have benefited from government assistance than those in urban areas (13% vs. 28%) (Figure 12), perhaps reflecting their lower likelihood of losing a main source of income due to the pandemic, as seen in Figure 2.

On the other hand, government assistance more frequently benefited wealthier households (30%) and more educated respondents (24%-27%) than those who are less well off (21%-23%) and less educated (13%).

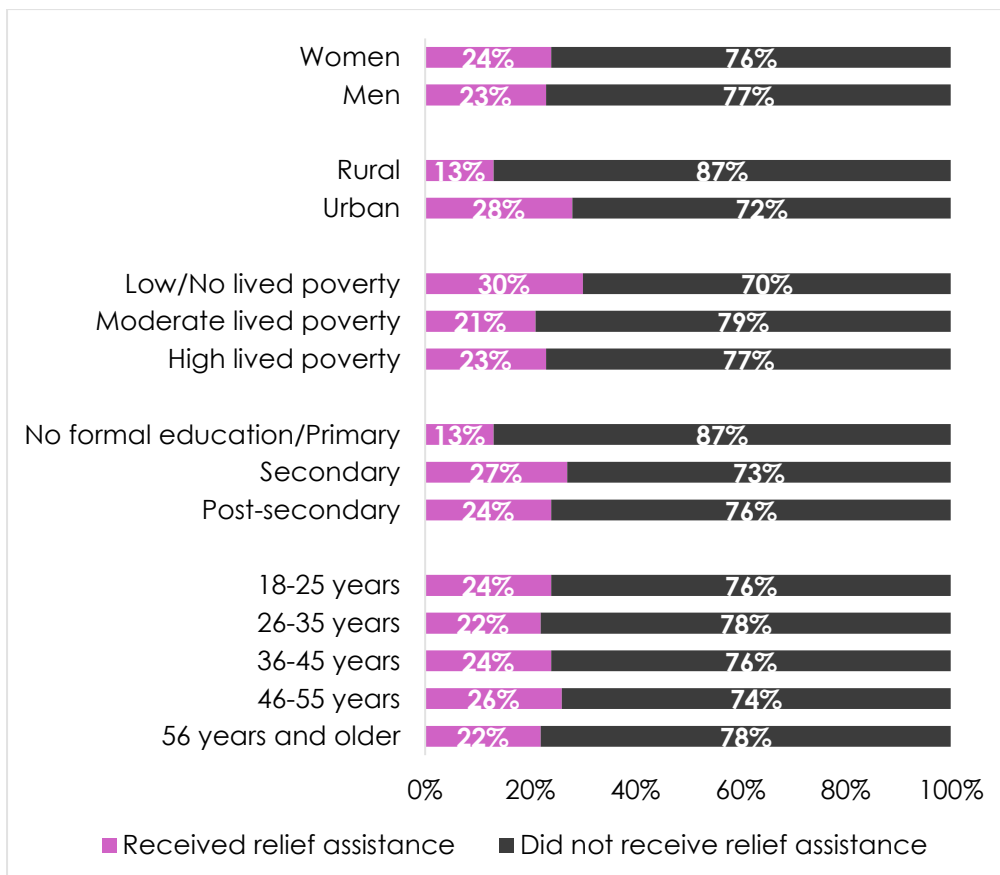
Eight in 10 respondents (79%) say that COVID-19 relief was distributed unfairly (Figure 13).

**Figure 11: Access to COVID-19 relief assistance** | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023



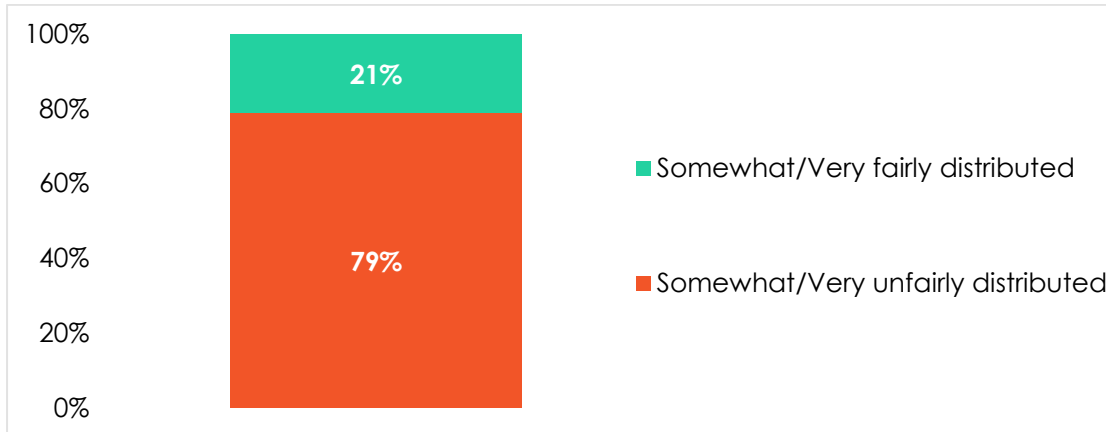
**Respondents were asked:** Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

**Figure 12: Access to COVID-19 relief assistance** | by demographic group | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023



**Respondents were asked:** Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

**Figure 13: Was COVID-19 relief assistance distributed fairly?** | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023

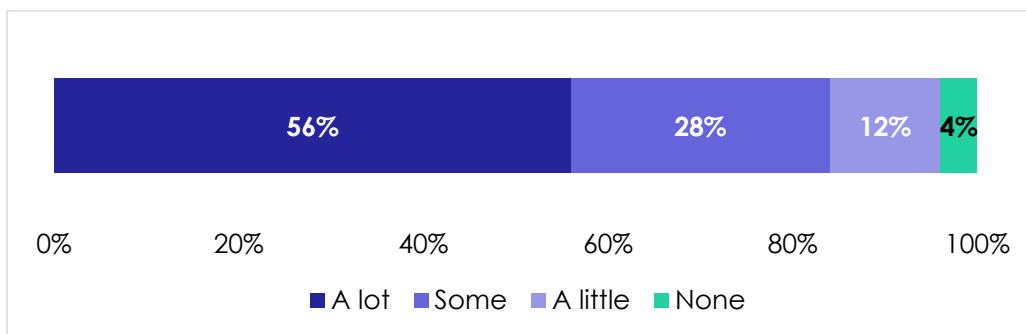


**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the distribution of government support to people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, has been fair or unfair?

### Corruption related to COVID-19

In addition to expressing significant dissatisfaction with the fairness of government relief assistance, most Congolese (84%) suspect that “some” or “a lot” of the resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to corruption (Figure 14). Only small minorities believe that just “a little” (12%) or “none” (4%) of these resources were embezzled.

**Figure 14: Perceived pandemic-related corruption** | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023



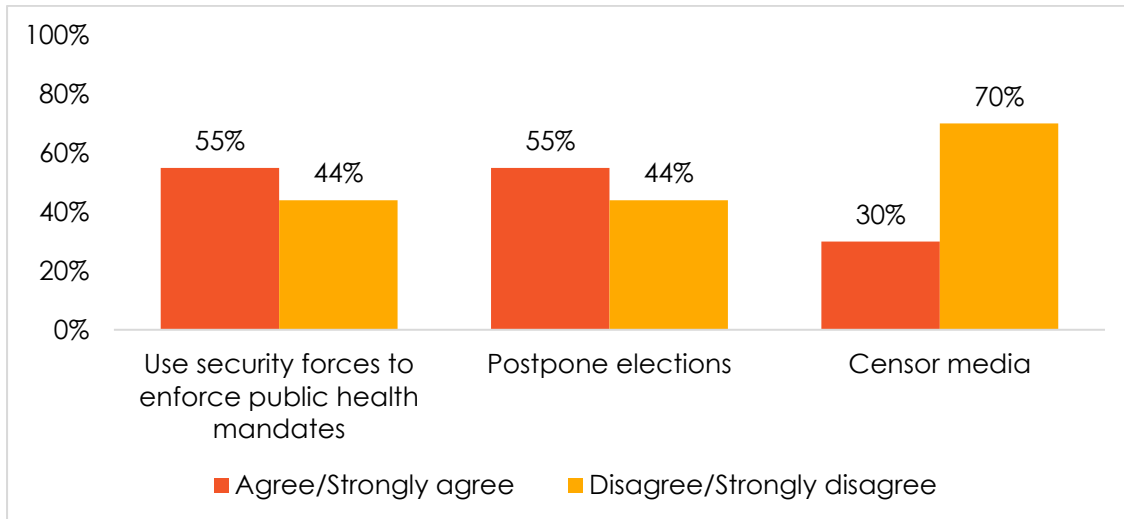
**Respondents were asked:** Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption?

### Limit democratic freedoms during a pandemic?

Lockdowns and other pandemic-related restrictions in some countries have raised questions about the extent to which citizens are willing to forego certain freedoms, even temporarily, to protect public health.

In Congo-Brazzaville, more than half (55%) of citizens think it is justified for the government to use the armed forces or the police to enforce public health mandates during an emergency like the pandemic, and the same percentage accept the postponing of elections (Figure 15). However, seven in 10 respondents (70%) “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with censoring media reporting during a public health emergency.

**Figure 15: Limit democratic freedoms during a public health emergency?**  
 | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023



**Respondents were asked:** When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures:

*Censoring media reporting?*

*Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like restrictions on public gatherings or wearing face masks?*

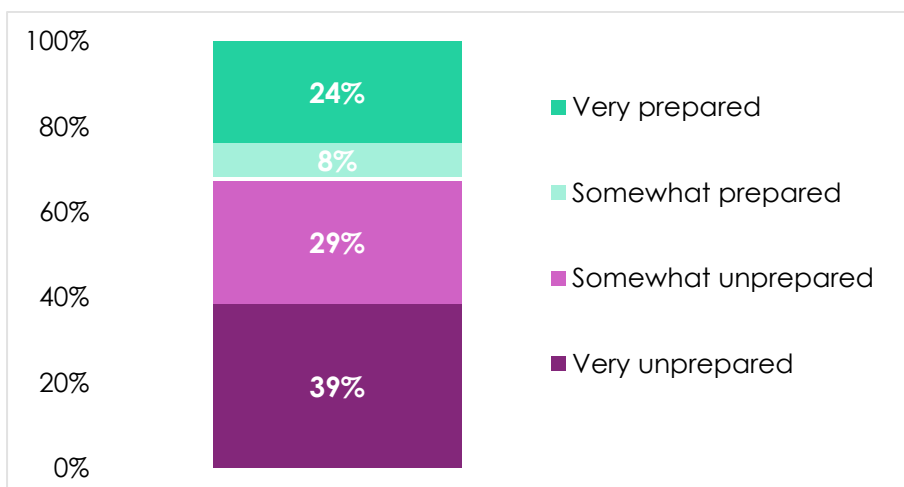
*Postponing elections?*

### Looking ahead

Citizens were asked to evaluate how prepared the government will be to deal with future public health emergencies based on their experience with the COVID-19 pandemic.

About two-thirds (68%) of respondents think their government will not be ready, including 39% who think it will be “very unprepared” (Figure 16). Only one-fourth (25%) believe the government will be “very prepared” for the next public health crisis.

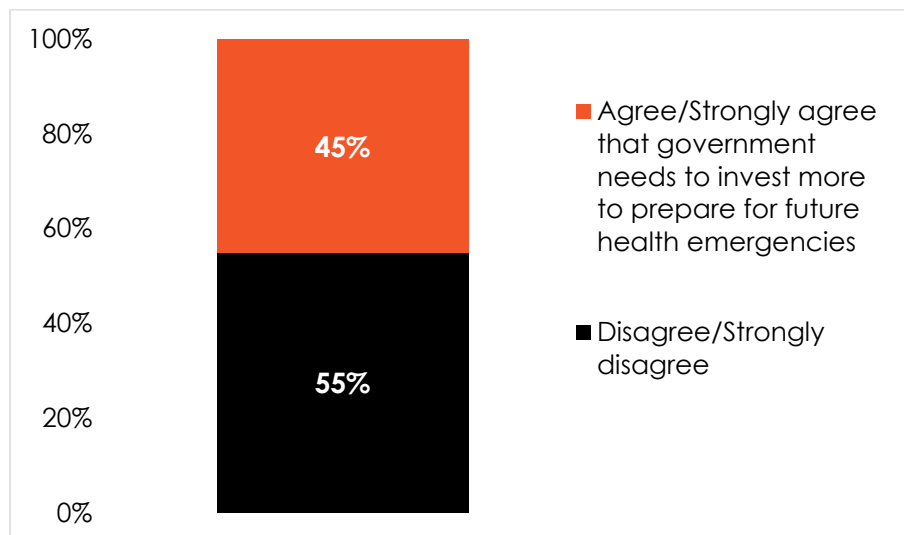
**Figure 16: Preparedness for future health emergencies** | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023



**Respondents were asked:** After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic in Congo-Brazzaville, how prepared or unprepared do you think the government will be to deal with future public health emergencies?

Views are divided when it comes to future investment in public health emergencies. While 45% say the government needs to invest more in preparations for future public health emergencies, even if it means that fewer resources are available for other health services, a narrow majority (55%) of those surveyed disagree (Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Invest more to prepare for future health emergencies? | Congo-Brazzaville | 2023**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services?

### Conclusion

In addition to its health effects, the COVID-19 pandemic had harsh economic consequences for Congolese households, and most citizens say the government's response was inadequate and marred by corruption.

Majority negative assessments of the government's distribution of household assistance, resourcing of health facilities, handling of education, and ability to ensure vaccine safety add up to an overall failing mark for the government's management of the pandemic response.

While most citizens think the government is not well prepared for a future health emergency, fewer than half say scarce health resources should be diverted to special preparations for such a crisis.

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